

ON FIRE LARRY SCHWARM

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ON FIRE LARRY SCHWARM

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ON FIRE LARRY SCHWARM

WINNER OF THE CENTER FOR DOCUMENTARY STUDIES/
HONICKMAN FIRST BOOK PRIZE IN PHOTOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT ADAMS

Larry Schwarm's photographs of fire on the prairie are so compelling that I cannot imagine any later photographer trying to do better. His pictures convince us that seemingly far away events are close by, relevant to any serious person's life.

The photographer engages our attention first by heightening our amazement at the sensuality of fire. Most of us have enjoyed looking into a fireplace, but few of us have observed as well as he has the astonishing shapes and colors and fluidity of fire. He is so skilled in recording its appearance that occasionally we almost hear the burning and feel the warmth.

My father and I used to burn off a field in Colorado, and I remember the smell of grass smoke, acid and sweet at once, resolving somehow the contradictions of the seasons. It is a memory that helps me understand the calm that seems to permeate the charred ground of Kansas.

If Schwarm enlists our interest by showing us the appearance of fire, he sustains that interest by suggesting what it might mean. To do that he must be familiar with his subject, have a disciplined command of his medium, see accurately and so compose effectively, and then select for his book just those pictures that convey what he intends.

What do the photographs mean? We recoil from that question in fear that the pictures might wither to abstraction, but their sensuality saves them. In any case we all do look for meaning in life and thus in art, its reflection. How could we not, since the two most evident characteristics of

life, beauty and suffering, seem a contradiction that undermines meaning, or at least obscures it.

Because Schwarm has chosen to include in his book views of beauty at so many different hours of day and dusk and night, and because he shows us beauty even after destruction, the pictures suggest to me that beauty lasts forever. As in the paintings of Frederic Church and the music of Beethoven and the poetry of Robinson Jeffers, it is the only answer that Nature appears to give us. It may feel a cruelly abbreviated reply, as cold as Church's pictures of icebergs, but there is no appeal. Our choice is ultimately whether to say yes to what cannot be avoided—lying down in glory with the burning grass and trees.

The prairie has often been compared to a seascape made of earth and air. Schwarm's pictures add to that the missing fourth element, helping us to understand.

Many of us would probably say, I think, that there is at least one other truth relevant to affirming life, one equal in significance to an awareness of natural beauty. William Blake wrote of it: "Mercy has a human heart, Pity a human face." Though as a landscape photographer Schwarm does not include people in his photographs, he does imply in the accompanying text something important (Dorothea Lange noted that successful pictures often depend on captions): the fires on the Flint Hills are now usually set and shaped by people who want, in so far as they understand, to help heal the earth.

ON FIRE

Everywhere ahead in the surrounding dark,
the land not separable from the black sky, stretch orange lines of fire,
red-gold on jet, angles and curves, oghams and cursives of flames,
infernal combustings, and a pall rising and
surrounding and seeming to make the valley a smoking pit.

What city of burning light is this,
and how could I have so lost my way to come into it and not know it?

—William Least Heat-Moon, from *PrairyErth*































































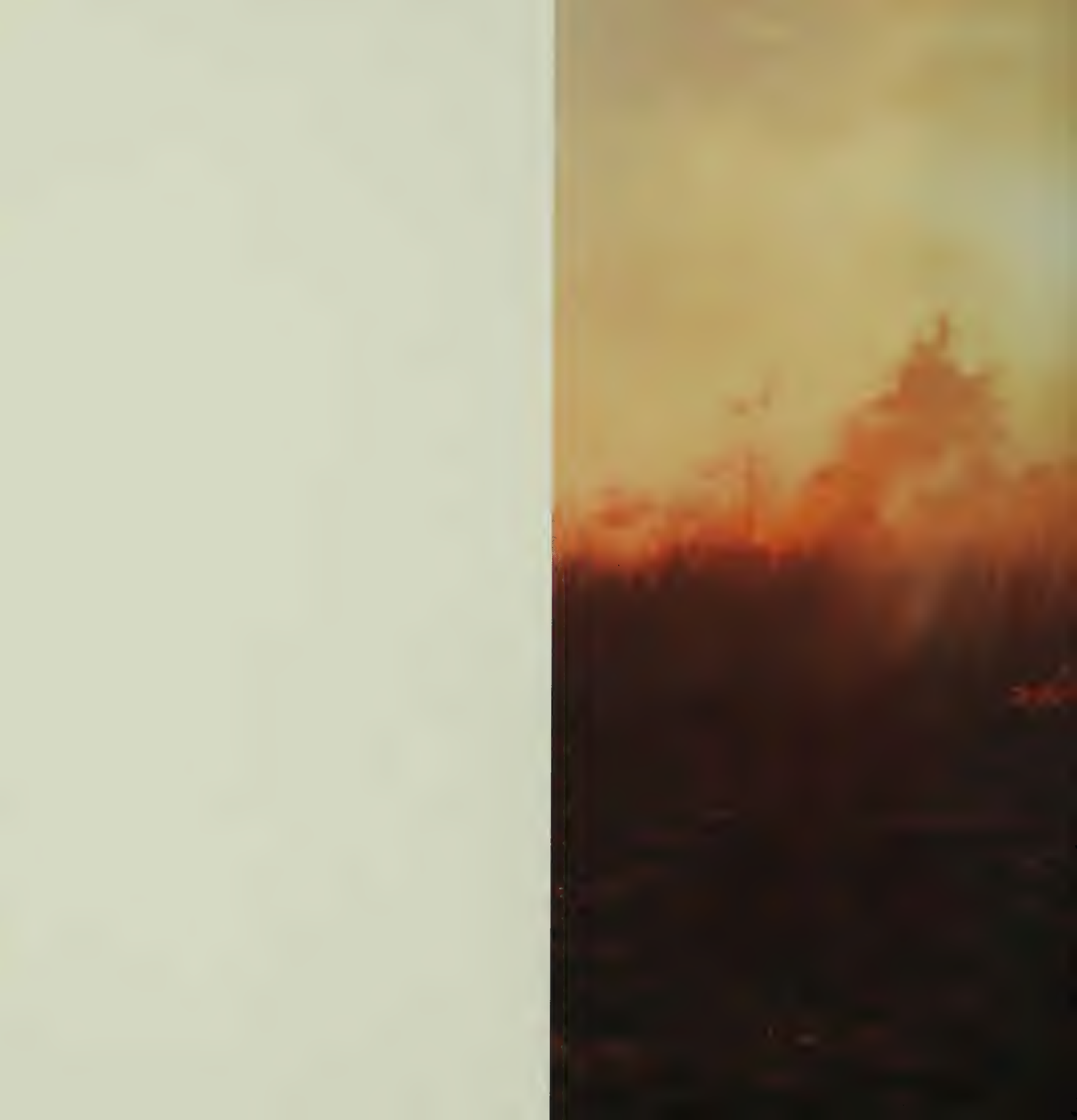




























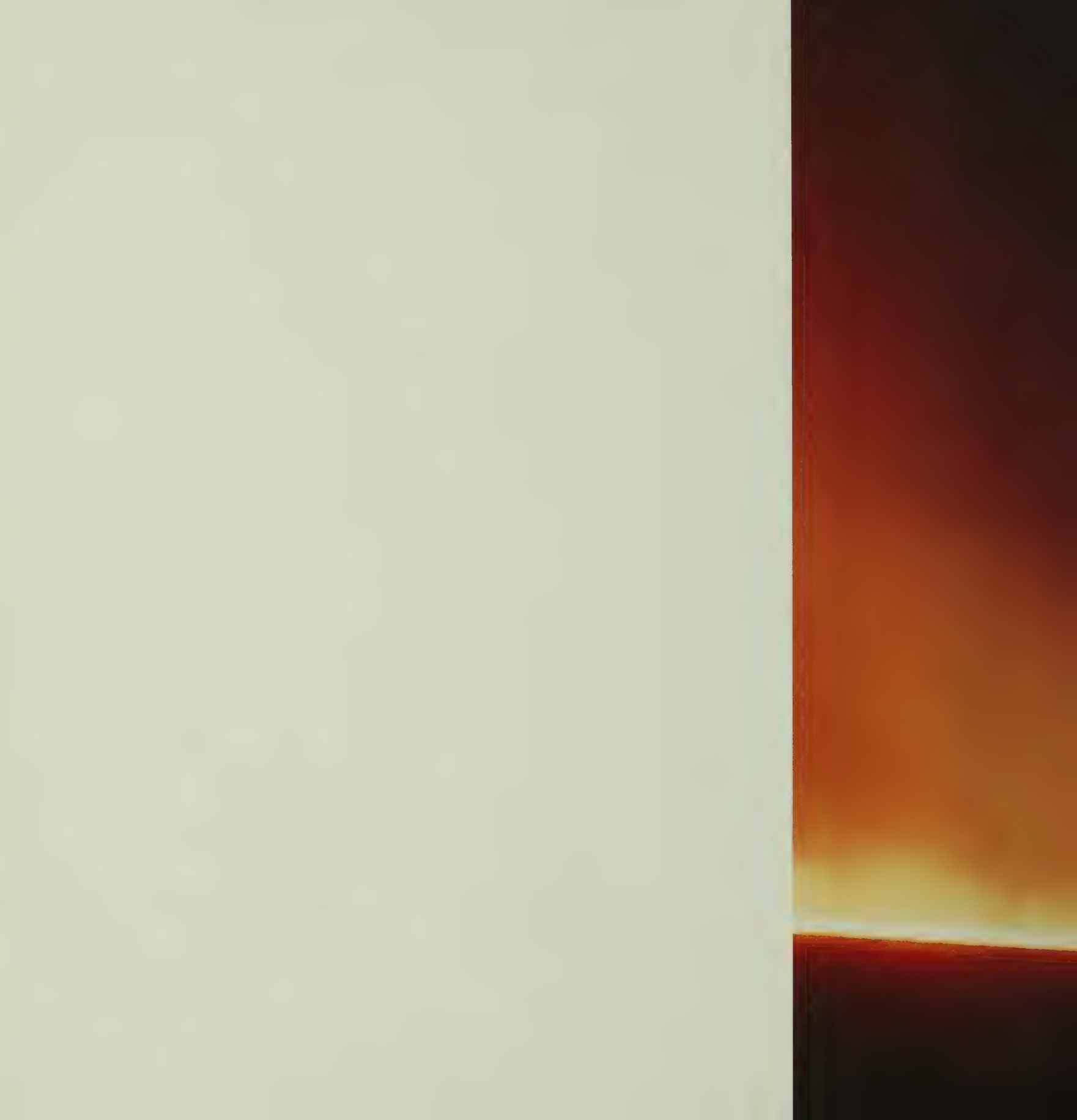


























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AFTERWORD

Photography has the remarkable power to impress into memory a distillation of a particular segment of time. The desire to hold memories of how a moment looks, smells, and feels led me to become a photographer.

Since ancient times fire has been considered one of the four elements, along with earth, air, and water. Fire has a connection to our collective unconscious—it is good and evil, soothing and terrifying, protective and threatening, a force for destruction and rebirth. Elijah was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire; Saint Anthony is sometimes depicted with his feet in flames from stamping out the devil. Fire heats our houses but can destroy our homes. And grass, too, in its many forms is fundamental to our being on this planet. Fire and grass—how could I not be drawn to them?

The North American tallgrass prairie once covered the eastern Great Plains, stretching from Texas to Canada and covering nearly 152 million acres. Agricultural and urban development have taken their toll, and today not even 1 percent of the original tallgrass prairie remains, with much of that broken into small, isolated parcels. My photographs are made on the largest remaining stand of the tallgrass prairie, the Flint Hills in east-central Kansas.

Fire is essential to the prairie ecosystem. Without it, the prairie would have grown into scrub forest. Before human habitation, unbroken expanses of grasses as tall as eight-feet high would catch on fire and burn for hundreds of miles. Native Americans set fires to entice bison to the

new grass that replaced the burned. European settlers adapted the practice and burned to encourage new growth for their cattle, as well as to kill invasive trees and weeds. What started as a natural phenomenon became an annual event controlled by people. The metaphor is obvious—without destruction there is no rebirth; for every act there is an opposing one.

The work in this book represents twelve years of photographing the controlled burning that occurs every spring in the Flint Hills. I never intended to document the fires in the strictest sense of the word, but rather to capture every essence of them, from calm and lyrical to angry and raging. I discovered in the fires' subtleties and abstractions a spirituality akin to what Mark Rothko expressed in his color-field paintings. These qualities, both quiet and other-worldly, form what I see as the sublime and mystical character of the burning landscape, where images are at once both sensuous and menacing.

I grew up on a farm in south-central Kansas. To describe it as subtle is something of an overstatement. There were no trees, no hills, and what water there was formed a muddy pond, more often dry than full. Neighbors lived miles apart; anything that happened was an event. That seemingly empty landscape taught me to look very carefully, for which I have always been grateful. No matter where I am, no matter what I'm looking at, my point of reference is the minimalist landscape of Kansas where I first observed the world.

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The Honickman Foundation in collaboration with
the Center for Documentary Studies
issues this inaugural prize book as
a tribute to the memory of

Michael E. Hoffman

Publisher, editor, and champion of photography
1942–2001

The Honickman Foundation is dedicated to the support of projects that promote the arts, education, health, and social change. Embodied in this commitment is a fundamental belief that creativity enriches contemporary society, because the arts are powerful tools for enlightenment, equity, and empowerment. Hence, this focus to help expand, nourish, and center attention on contemporary photography. It is the foundation's aim to stimulate America's energetic photo-collecting universe into the full realization of photography's rich accomplishment and potential, both as an art form and as a tool for social change.

THE CENTER FOR DOCUMENTARY STUDIES / HONICKMAN
FIRST BOOK PRIZE IN PHOTOGRAPHY

This biennial prize offers publication of a book of photography, a \$3,000 award, and inclusion in a traveling exhibition of prizewinners. Each year a distinguished individual in the field of photography is chosen to judge the prize and write an introduction to the winning book. The prize is open to American photographers who use their cameras for creative exploration, whether it be of places, people, or communities; of the natural or social world; of beauty at large or the lack of it; of objective or subjective realities. The prize will honor work that is visually compelling, that bears witness, and that has integrity of purpose. *On Fire* is the inaugural book in the series.



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